



COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR CANCER PATIENTS: BRIDGING GAPS IN TREATMENT AND AFTERCARE

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ABSTRACT

Cancer is an illness that has not only been widespread in its ramifications and reach but also diverse in its effects and presentation. Research has demonstrated that symptomology extends beyond only a physical toll but can also pose significant threats to mental well-being, constructing a complex profile of the multifaceted manifestations of its impact. Assessing the factors that contribute to mental health risks as well as how this translates to current support is imperative in potentially bolstering the development of new post-treatment plans. This literature review explores the currently available treatment options for symptom management as well as introduces a case study illustrating insight into the unique challenges that might be posed to a cancer patient as they traverse daily life. Based on preliminary findings, diversifying options and strengthening aftercare supports can enhance the patient experience as well as promote better long-term outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Cancer, National Drug Code, Chemotherapy, Symptoms, Mental Health, Aftercare.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020 alone, over eighteen million cases of cancer were diagnosed. Despite its broad reach, there remain significant gaps in accessibility to treatment and localized long-term support for cancer patients. Current efforts have been honed to target prevention and detection measures, in addition to therapeutic applications. For example, in 2017, the FDA approved genomic profiling tests, allowing for the testing of tumors for genetic changes that may confer susceptibility to treatment. Despite these efforts, many medicines, drugs, and tests have downsides and side effects; some even have life-long impacts. While cancerous cells or tumors may be eradicated after treatment, the aftercare needed is just as important for patients and has been shown to be an underserved aspect of the long-term treatment process. Through further inspection, it becomes evident that once a patient leaves the hospital or dermatologist's office, many are left to grapple with the day-to-day changes and the long-term effects on their quality of life themselves.

Psychological Impacts

While cancer can cause severe detriment to physical capabilities, this can often coincide with negative impacts on mental well-being as well. The resources and support for this area in the treatment process are limited, and the chronic effects of a disease like cancer often warrant comprehensive approaches to treatment that extend beyond the pharmaceutical and into areas of socio-emotional support. Like chess, cancer is warfare of the mind; patients endure debilitating effects on their emotions, hormones, and how they handle daily stressors in their lives. This prompts a vital question: how can current approaches to oncologic care be strengthened to support patients not only during inpatient treatment but also in managing the aftercare of chronic symptoms? Currently, patients are provided with limited resources for navigating their new lives and nursing

themselves back to health. This means that many patients are forced to quit their jobs, neglect activities that were previously enjoyable, and learn to exist in a reality vastly different from the one they lived in prior to their diagnosis. Understanding the aftermath of cancer is inconceivable for those who have never had to undergo the life-changing experiences that it encompasses.

Current Treatment Programs and New Directions

After treatment, patients continue to face the complexities of symptom management while maneuvering the needs of their daily lives. One of the primary goals for cancer survivors is to take proper care of their physical well-being. Maintaining a healthy body and subsequently sustaining energy and strength can boost their confidence, according to the Mayo Clinic's article, "Cancer Survivors: Care for Your Body After Treatment." Cancer affects one's body in numerous ways: "As a cancer survivor, you may find that the physical, emotional, and social effects of having cancer have taken a toll on you." Figuring out the best steps to take varies significantly among those who have been affected by cancer. Many factors must be looked at, including but not limited to BMI, age, and mental health. These are a few critical measures that must be factored into the types of wellness and treatment plans dedicated to improving physical health and fitness. Patients might not all have the necessary education or understanding of these various factors, and other aspects like food insecurity can hinder efforts towards strengthening physical health. Enhancing access to resources like good quality food and facilitating education on the importance of meeting necessary dietary needs can help patients, particularly those in at-risk or vulnerable groups. Incorporating dietary plans and regular meetings with a dietician, in addition to support dedicated to strengthening food security, might help bolster a patient's physical health.

In addition to supporting physical well-being, supporting mental health can be an equally significant portion of treatment. Tending to physical appearance and health becomes increasingly difficult with increased anxiety and feelings of depression. Not only will maintaining better mental health allow patients to improve their physical condition, but it will also allow them to prevent the development of other comorbid conditions. This is evident from several studies conducted on the increase of mental illness in cancer patients. According to Pitman et al. (2018), depression affects up to 20% of cancer patients, and anxiety affects nearly 10% of patients with cancer. These numbers stand in contrast with the national averages of around 5% and 7%, respectively (Pitman et al., 2018). Cancer patients can oftentimes experience a loss of motivation and feelings of being overwhelmed, hopelessness, and confusion. The mental baggage that cancer patients carry on their shoulders is far more complex than what can be treated at home. While that may be the first step in recognizing the issue, cancer patients need professional supervision. If cancer patients continued to meet with their oncologist after treatment, they would be able to get proper referrals to institutions that would be able to treat mental setbacks efficiently.

Cancer patients on average see their oncologist anywhere from one to four times a year, as well as one to three follow-up visits on average (Susan G. Komen Organization, 2023). Over a year's span, symptoms, emotions, and physical state can change drastically for a patient diagnosed with cancer, requiring additional visits to the doctor. The need for additional support is exacerbated by increased comorbidities with cancer, like depression. Patients experiencing increased symptoms on top of the physical effects of the disease will need more long-term support and care. According to the National Institutes of Health, "patients who visited oncologists were more likely to receive an anticancer drug, radiation therapy, and an increased number of diagnostic/screening services than those visiting other physicians." Despite the mean average of time spent at oncologist appointments regarding breast cancer standing at twenty-three minutes, a single visit can benefit an individual greatly both during and after treatment. However, due to these visits being relatively infrequent, most cancer patients are left to decide for themselves what the best course of action is.

Some clinics provide a "follow-up cancer care plan." However, a majority do not go in depth about questions that cancer patients may incline at home or at best give general facts such as, "exercise more" or "maintain a healthy diet." Dr. Mortiz states, "The standard cancer treatments are not meant to heal, but to destroy." His finding provides insight into how harsh cancer treatments may be under the surface. This further exemplifies how difficult it is for one to maintain mental ease and physical strength on their journey to reach their best health. Only an oncologist can properly understand the concerns that cancer patients will have, depicting how crucial it is for the knowledge and resources of oncology offices to be open to the soldiers who are constantly fighting for their health.

The Multifaceted Toll of Cancer: A Personal Case Example
Despite never personally being diagnosed with cancer, I have

seen the process firsthand—the steps and the toll that treatment exerts on an individual—and witnessed an anonymous subject's difficulties as a patient. The subject was diagnosed with Stage 3A Breast Cancer estrogen-positive lobular carcinoma in June 2013. They went through two surgeries, chemotherapy (Taxotere & Cytosan) and radiation. Since then, they have been taking tamoxifen to block estrogen and may continue for life due to how aggressive the cancer was. Chemotherapy using the drug Taxotere had an unknown side effect of hair loss, which was not disclosed at the time of treatment. Currently, there is a lawsuit against the company; however, they were not able to participate because the hospital misplaced the national drug code.

Over the years, I have witnessed them fight numerous battles. In 2018, they were diagnosed with subacute thyroiditis and a constant fever for weeks, leading them to be hospitalized at Stanford Hospital. Despite the cancer cells no longer being active, there is always anxiety and fear that linger. I have included an excerpt from their experiences:

"Cancer is a huge silent battle - emotionally and physically. Everyone's journey and the way they deal with it are different. Initially, I went through the treatment in denial. I went through six cycles of Cytosan Taxotere Chemotherapy. I was hospitalized for the last chemo because of the physical toll it took on me. Despite all the challenges, I tried to make myself look as normal as possible and experimented with different wigs and makeup. After I was done with chemo, I was very excited about my hair growing back and feeling the same again. Wearing a wig is tough, it feels tight on the head and can be especially difficult during the summer. It was another huge setback for me when my hair didn't grow back. I was not informed of the possible permanent hair loss side effects of Tamoxifen. If I had known, maybe I would have asked for an alternative chemotherapy. As the years went by, I realized that cancer is a permanent diagnosis. I started to accept that life would never be the same again. I got used to wearing a wig and the mental cloud that lingers on. I visit my oncologist twice a year. I relive the cancer fear before each visit. But I have learned to accept that life is not perfect, and that there is happiness around us. We just need to reach out and embrace it." - Anonymous, 2023

Another aspect that makes the after-treatment of cancer particularly difficult is the cost and expenses of the drugs provided to patients who are diagnosed with cancer. Prices for insurance range from two thousand to eight thousand dollars. However, without health insurance, it could cost anywhere from ten thousand to two hundred thousand dollars. This raises a question: how can these resources be readily available to the public with such a high maintenance cost? However, this issue is already being worked on and resolved by different organizations and companies. For example, in the Bay Area, California, there is an organization that I used to work for known as Bay Area Cancer Connections¹. They provide several types of resources for cancer survivors. Specifically on their website, there is a subsection that details a fundraiser known as "The Pink Fun," which is a nonprofit organization that provides

financial aid to low-income cancer patients. Through increased funding in the medical field and support for cancer patients, the known spike in cancer treatment can decrease over time, making the drugs more affordable.

CONCLUSION

“Cancer,” the word that has led to significant impacts on quality of life, continues to cause mayhem as one of the leading epidemics in our world. “Over two million people will be affected by this disease in one year by 2050” (Wier et al., 2021). However, with strong, comprehensive treatments that target multiple facts of a patient’s daily life, the prevention of severe long-term detriments can be made possible. Through providing education, enhancing accessibility, and increasing digital video and communication with physicians, patients, especially those in at-risk or vulnerable groups, will have stronger support to aid them through and beyond treatment. Through increased funding and advancements in the medical field, there is hope to see a world where no individual would have to walk into a hospital feeling uneasy about their treatment and uncertain about their future.

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depression%20(%204%)

Appendix

¹ Bay Area Cancer Connections is an organization that is formally known to support breast cancer and ovarian cancer patients currently undergoing treatment or in recovery. The organization connects patients to local resources as well as helps provide services educating them on aspects of their treatment, financial support, and offering free prosthetics and wigs. They host a variety of programs including connecting cancer patients post-treatment with those currently undergoing treatment, support groups, and recreational events.